

Speak Easy #006 – How to pronounce “-less”

Episode description

In this episode, Andrew and Suzanne answer a listener’s question about the pronunciation of “-less.”

Fun fact

The Culips team loves answering questions from listeners. If you have a question you’d like answered, send an email to contact@Culips.com.

Material included in the study guide

- Transcript
- Practice exercises
- Bonus audio downloads



Transcript

Andrew: Hey, everyone. Andrew here, and I've got a question for you before we get started with today's episode. Do you follow Culips on Instagram or subscribe to the Culips YouTube channel? If not, you really should. We've been uploading some really awesome content on YouTube and Instagram and I don't want you to miss out on it. You'd also be doing us a huge favour by following us on Instagram, subscribing to our channel on YouTube. So if you'd like to check us out on those two social media services, visit [YouTube.com/CulipsESLPodcast](https://www.youtube.com/CulipsESLPodcast) and also [Instagram.com/Culips_English](https://www.instagram.com/Culips_English). All right, we'll see you online. And now, for today's episode.

Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And my name is Suzanne.

Andrew: And you are listening to Speak Easy by Culips.

Hey there, Suzanne.

Suzanne: Hey, Andrew. How's it going?

Andrew: I'm doing very well, thanks. Sue, it's been a little while since our last Speak Easy episode, but we're back!

Suzanne: We are. It's exciting.

Andrew: Yeah, super exciting. And today we have a short but sweet episode. And we're actually going to address a question that we got asked via Twitter.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: And it's a pronunciation question and I know, Suzanne, you're the pronunciation expert in the Culips office. So I thought I should defer to you. I should ask you.

Suzanne: Sure, this is so exciting. OK, so we got a question from Summerilse and they ask, "Hi Andrew, sometimes the L-E-S-S or less at the end of the word, right, is pronounced /ɪ/ like sit. Sometimes it's pronounced /ə/ like the. What's the difference, I'm wondering?" So we have L-E-S-S less or less, right?

Andrew: Yeah, because the spelling is exactly the same with this suffix, right? L-E-S-S, but in some varieties of English, sometimes it's less and sometimes it's less. And so, this Twitter user is wondering when do I say less, when do I say less. That's a very good question.

Andrew: And, Suzanne, I will let you answer the question here in just a moment. But before we get to the answer, I want to remind everyone that there is a study guide for this episode available now on our website, Culips.com. And, actually, there are study guides for all of the episodes that we create and upload. So if you are looking to take your English to the next level and improve your pronunciation and your listening fluency, your vocabulary, all of these necessary English skills, then you're going to want to study with our study guides. So please visit Culips.com for all the information you need and start studying with the guides today.

Suzanne, what is the answer to the question?

Suzanne: Dun, dun. All right. Well, in North America we generally use LISS, the /ɪ/ sound, as in sit. In place of the schwa, not all the time, but in most cases, we actually say /ɪ/. So it's not only with L-E-S-S, it's with, sometimes, T-I-O-N or S-I-O-N. For example, we might say communication /ɪn/ instead of communication (ʃən).

Andrew: Right, yeah.

Suzanne: So, we generally use more of an /ɪ/ sound. Again, I'm going to reiterate that we don't always use the /ɪ/ but it's more often used in North America, especially when it's L-E-S-S or N-E-S-S, right? Like kindness, right? We'll say kindness (kaɪndnɪs).

Andrew: Kindness.

Suzanne: Instead of kindness (kaɪndnəs). Kindness, we don't say.

Andrew: I would say (kaɪndnɪs), smoothness (smuðnɪs), faithfulness (feɪθfəlnɪs), like this.

Suzanne: Yes, exactly. So, the two examples that Summerilse gives us, "effortless" and "cordless," so those would both be /ɪs/ if we were speaking English in North America. Now, when we look at other varieties of English, such as in the UK or in Australia or New Zealand or parts of South Africa, there will be a schwa (ə) used like læs or nəs or sən. So you might hear people in the UK say communication or cordless or wireless or effortless, less (ləs). So this is more widely used, the schwa, I should say, is more widely used in the UK varieties of English.

Andrew: It seems to me that the UK variety of English and Australian English, these other varieties, they're sort of deeper in the throat, right?

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: That schwa vowel sounds like it's coming from deeper in your throat if you say communication or cordless.

Suzanne: It's true, it's true.

Andrew: Even when I say it, my voice lowers an octave.

Suzanne: Now, this isn't hard and fast truth necessarily it's partly my experience and speculation. But I think the reason why people in the UK use the "uh" more often and, just like you said Andrew, it sounds like it's further back in the mouth, is because when we teach, say, a British accent, we tell students to really open the back of their throat and sort of use the back vowels and the back of their tongue or the mid part of their tongue a bit more. And so the vowels are a little bit more centred inside the mouth.

Whereas when we teach a North American accent we tell people to have a higher and more forward tongue arch. And this is because if you hear people on TV shows or commercials, you might hear a bit more of a forward, brighter, sometimes mistaken for nasal, sound in someone's voice.

For example, if we spoke with sort of an Estuary accent which is, like, a common sound in London, like, sort of like this, it's really in the middle of my voice. But if I speak like I'm from the US, which is where I'm from, you might hear this kind of forward bright, really resonate in the front of my mouth kind of sound.

So this makes us think that when we're speaking in a UK English, we are pulling the vowels a little bit further toward the centre, and /ə/ is a central vowel. And when we're speaking with a more North American accent, we are pulling the vowels a bit more forward, which is the /ɪ/ sound. The /ɪ/ is a more front and forward vowel. I think that this might be why, but I don't have complete research on that yet.

Andrew: Well, you've convinced me, Suzanne. It sounds very believable to me. And I think this is good news for anybody that's curious about this question, because it's rather black and white, isn't it?

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: It's really a dialect issue, an accent issue, and not one of those tricky issues where you have to learn a different pronunciation depending on which word it is. It's simply that if you're in North America speaking with a North American accent and, of course, we're talking about the broad popular North American accents—there might be some smaller regional accents that differ—but the broad accent in North America, we say /lɪs/ like cordless and in other varieties of English, then you might hear /ləs/ like cordless.

Suzanne: Yes. Exactly, exactly. And it's important to know not just for you to make it but for you to perceive it. So when you travel, you're not confused.

Andrew: Thank you very much for your question Summerilse. And to everyone else, if you have any questions for us, feel free to get in touch. You could email us your question. Our email address is contact@Culips.com, or if you would prefer to send it through Facebook or Twitter, then feel free to do that. All you have to do is look us up on those sites by searching for the Culips English podcast.

Suzanne: Yeah, and we would love for you to ask more pronunciation questions and feature them on the next Speak Easy episode.

Andrew: Yeah, that sounds like a plan. I like it.

Well, guys, that about wraps it up for us today. We will be back soon with another episode and we will talk to you then. Goodbye.

Suzanne: Bye.

Practice exercises

The audio file for these exercises can be downloaded here: <https://goo.gl/mRwP29>.

- 1. Listening (perception) practice: Write IS or US or IN or UN next to the word you hear on the recording. If you hear IS write IS, and if you hear US, write US.**

1. Communication -	4. Backless -	7. Listen -
2. Abrasion -	5. Reckless -	8. Reason -
3. Basis -	6. Institution -	9. Happiness -

- 2. Practice repeating the words or phrases with the IS, US, IN, or UN sounds.**

1. Reckless communication	5. Thoughtless objections	9. Fruitless mission
2. Needless arbitration	6. Meaningless	10. Effortless organization
3. Ruined reputation	7. Featureless	11. Pointless directions
4. Houses for sale	8. Directionless	12. Aimless creations



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